Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study

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Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states: "The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States' efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001." The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.

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Glossary

AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
AQS	Al-Qaeda Syria
ASD (SO/LIC)	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
MNSTC-I	Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq
MSC	Mujahideen Shura Council
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
PSYOPS	Psychological Operations
SSR	Security Sector Reform

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Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, "The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States' efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001." The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.[1]

Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core's current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.

3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

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[1] Julia McQuaid, Jonathan Schroden, Pamela G. Faber, P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Alexander Powell, Zack Gold, David Knoll, and William Rosenau, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda,* CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

In order to answer the first four questions posed by Section 1228, CNA conducted eight case studies on groups affiliated and associated with Al-Qaeda.[2] The case studies were then used to conduct a cross-case comparative analysis.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) case study used in the *Independent Assessment.* CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA's full findings, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda.*[3]

The present case study is organized as follows: First, we introduce AQI by highlighting its leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. Second, we explain the evolution of the group by phases, from its origins to the present day. Third, we outline the security vulnerabilities in the areas of Iraq where AQI operated. Fourth, we outline the U.S. approach to countering AQI. We conclude the case study with a discussion on whether the U.S. has, at any time, effectively defeated, dismantled, or disrupted the group.

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[2] These groups include: Al-Qaeda "core," Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda Syria (AQS), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

[3] McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda.*

Overview of AQI

Founded in 2002, the group that would later become known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) played a major role in the Sunni opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq and political domination by the country's Shiite majority. At its height, AQI had an estimated 5,000–10,000 members, a substantial percentage of which came from outside the country.[4] AQI's ideological fanaticism, the alien presence of foreign fighters, and the group's use of extreme violence prompted a backlash within Sunni communities, most notably in Anbar Province. Anti-AQI Sunni resistance grew into what became known as the Awakening. The so-called Sons of Iraq—trained and paid by U.S. forces—combined with the 2007 U.S. troop "surge" and aggressive counterterrorism activities, badly weakened the group. But AQI—now calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)—was able to rally. The civil war in neighboring Syria helped rejuvenate the group, which rebranded itself once again, now calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Leadership and structure

Information on AQI's organization, like that of any underground group, remains limited. Yet a few general conclusions are possible: AQI's structure evolved over time. Under the group's first leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI had a "leadership-centric" organizational structure that depended heavily on Zarqawi's purported charisma.[5] Following Zarqawi's death in a U.S. airstrike on June 7, 2006, the group gradually

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[4] Kenneth Katzman, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq: Assessment and Outside Links,* Congressional Research Service, August 15, 2008, accessed June 2, 2017, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf.

[5] M.J. Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq,* Case Study No. 1, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011, accessed June 1, 2017, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedaIraq_Web.pdf.

developed a more bureaucratic and institutionalized structure.[6] Instead of central leadership, ISI operational decisions were made regionally.[7]

This adaptation would help the group survive efforts to "decapitate' its leadership. At the same time, however, decentralization meant that the organization was heavily dependent on local commanders, many of who were poorly trained and unable to lead effectively when faced with increasing pressure by counterinsurgency forces. [8]

Relationship with Al-Qaeda core

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi became known to Osama Bin Laden in 1998.[9] Bin Laden thought Zarqawi was too hard line, especially in his stance against Shiite Muslims.[10] Another leading AQ figure, Seif al-Adel, appreciated Zarqawi's previous attempts to stoke jihadist attacks in Jordan. At Adel's urging, Bin Laden provided Zarqawi around $5,000 to establish his own training camp in Herat, Afghanistan.[11]

If Zarqawi was too hard line for Bin Laden, Zarqawi felt the opposite about Bin Laden. The ideologically stricter Zarqawi accepted Bin Laden's money, but he did not pledge fealty to the AQ chief during their time in Afghanistan prior to the 2001 U.S. invasion.[12]

During the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Zarqawi and his trainees joined AQ core and the Taliban in fighting against U.S. forces and their domestic allies.[13] Zarqawi was not the only foreign jihadist leader to flee Afghanistan for Iran. In a book about Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda's Adel, who served as a key AQ conduit to Zarqawi, claimed that the

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[6] M.J. Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[7] Brian Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq,* National Security Studies Program Policy Paper (August 2011), New America Foundation, https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4343-redefining-the-islamic-state/Fishman_Al_Qaeda_In_Iraq.023ac20877a64488b2b791cd7e313955.pdf.

[8] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[9] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[10] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[11] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[12] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State.* Analysis Paper Number 19 (March 2015), Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf.

[13] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

Jordanian consulted with AQ leadership about moving his operations into Iraq.[14]. The AQ security chief assisted in the movement of Zarqawi's group into northern Iraq and facilitated the flow of other Arab jihadists through Syria into Kurdish-controlled Iraqi territory.[15]

In October 2004, Zarqawi formally pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden.[16] Al-Qaeda saw its opportunity to benefit from chaos in the heart of Arab-majority countries and to directly engage U.S. forces by acquiring Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (The Monotheism and the Holy War Group), or TwJ. This gave Zarqawi a negotiating advantage over AQ core when it came to the affiliate's strategy. Al-Qaeda eventually accepted Zarqawi's anti-Shia platform and AQI was established without Zarqawi having to compromise. At the same time, Zarqawi benefited from Al-Qaeda's channels of financial and manpower support.[17]

Tensions developed between AQ core and its new affiliate, particularly with respect to the latter's sectarian attacks. By the summer of 2005, the AQ leadership was concerned that Zarqawi's actions were harming public support for the Al-Qaeda brand—both in Iraq and internationally.[18] In letters to Zarqawi, both Zawahiri and another top figure, Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, requested that the AQI leader follow guidance from the AQ core. 'Abd al-Rahman advised Zarqawi not to make strategic decisions on matters including sectarian war and external operations without consulting AQ core leadership and other Iraqi jihadist leaders.[19]

The death of Zarqawi and the growing Sunni backlash against AQI provided Al-Qaeda's core leadership the opportunity to strengthen its influence over the affiliate.[20] Zarqawi's successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, was an Egyptian with close ties to Zawahiri.[21] His relationship to Al-Qaeda's deputy leader began in 1982, as a member of Egypt's Islamic Jihad.[22] At the same time, the merger of AQI into ISI

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[14] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* p. 119.

[15] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[16] Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs To Know.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 163-64.

[17] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* pp. 117-118, 123.

[18] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[19] Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, Letter to Zarqawi, 2005, available in English translation at Combating Terrorism Center, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2.

[20] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[21] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[22] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

blurred the lines of communication between AQ core and the larger Iraqi organization. AQI's Muhajir may have pledged loyalty to Al-Qaeda and vouched for ISI's fealty to the organization.[23] However, AQ core appeared neither familiar with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi nor was the ISI leader in direct contact with AQ leadership.[24]

Both Zawahiri and Seif al-Adel had called for the declaration of an Islamic emirate in Iraq as early as 2005.[25] However, Bin Laden and other AQ leaders opposed the declaration of an Islamic "state," as ISI did not have the capability for state-like operations. The failure of such a state-building exercise would be harmful to the reputation of the broader jihadist movement.[26] Additionally, AQI did not consult with AQ leadership or with other local actors before declaring its establishment of ISI.[27]

The declaration of a state forced Bin Laden's hand: either he accept the move or publicize his lack of control over the affiliate's decisions.[28] At the beginning of 2007, both 'Abd al-Rahman and Al-Qaeda's Abu Yahya al-Libi published tracts in support of ISI's establishment. Eventually, public support from Bin Laden and Zawahiri followed.[29]

The AQ core-affiliate relationship deteriorated with the 2010 deaths of Muhajir and Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi. AQ core had no involvement in the selection of ISI's next leader. Once ISI appointed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Al-Qaeda leaders reached out to their interlocutors in Iraq for any information about the new local leadership.[30] In January 2011, AQ spokesman Adam Gadahn wrote to Bin Laden that core-ISI relations were "effectively cut for a number of years."[31] He recommended officially severing ties.

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[23] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

[24] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* p. 123.

[25] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*; and Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* p. 205.

[26] William McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State,* (New York: St. Martin's, 2015), pp. 15-19.

[27] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* p. 205; and Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

[28] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* p. 205.

[29] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*; and Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

[30] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* p. 185.

[31] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

Ideology and goals

From its founding onwards, AQI embraced a Salafist-jihadist ideology and the belief in the imperative of establishing a new caliphate run in strict accordance with sharia law. Under Zarqawi, AQI stressed the importance of driving out the infidel invaders; extending what al- Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy head of Al-Qaeda (AQ) called the "jihad wave" into Iraq's neighbors; and, finally, attacking Iraq's ascendant Shiite community and fueling a sectarian civil war.[32] A Sunni-Shia conflict, in Zarqawi's judgment, would undermine Iraq's emerging Shiite-dominated government and perhaps force a withdrawal of US occupation forces.[33] In addition, Zarqawi hoped to frame AQI as the defender of Sunni populations threatened by Shiite rule.[34]

After Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI continued to fight against foreign occupation and Shia control, and maintain at least a rhetorical commitment to establishing an Islamic state. The group, now calling itself the ISI, worked with renewed vigor to undermine the legitimacy of Iraqi state by stepping up its kinetic attack. As Zarqawi's successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir declared in 2009, that large, courageous, and targeted operations are necessary to break the bones of the infidels."[35]

After 2010, ISI renewed its objective to control territory and exercise governance.[36] This was a renewal of the Islamic State of Iraq's attempt to establish governance.[37]

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[32] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Letter to Zarqawi, 2005. Available in English translation at https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2; Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State,* Analysis Paper Number 19 (March 2015), Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf; and Kenneth Katzman, *Al-Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment,* Congressional Research Service, August 17, 2005, https://web.cna.org/pdf/DanaInfo=.awxyCgvFjwv+crsreports-3585585.

[33] Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf p. 11

[34] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[35] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[36] Michael Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, Report of the Joint Hearing of the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2013, http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20131212/101591/HHRG-113-FA18-Wstate-KnightsM-20131212.pdf, p. 6.

[37] Brett McGurk, *Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests.* Report of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, February 5,

More generally, ISI sought to create an Islamic caliphate beginning in parts of Iraq and Syria and eventually stretching across the Levant.[38] ISI also used the Syrian civil war to renew its sectarian conflict.[39] In the third phase of its "Breaking the Walls" campaign, ISI set out to reignite Iraq's sectarian civil war.[40] By 2012, the group also staked a claim to parts of Syria.[41]

Funding

Like many insurgent groups, AQI/ISI relied on a variety funding streams. In the run-up to the founding of AQI, Zarqawi and Al-Qaeda operatives made contacts with Iraqi intelligence in Syria to mobilize and train foreign fighters who would counter the 2003 U.S. invasion.[42] Later, AQI received funding from dedicated Al-Qaeda channels.[43] As of 2009, AQI was essentially self-financing, supporting itself through crimes such as extortion, ransom kidnappings, the theft of oil, and trafficking in stolen vehicles.[44]

2014, http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140205/101716/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20140205.pdf, p 5.

[38] Brett McGurk, *Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests*, p. 1.

[39] Daniel Byman, "The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq." Testimony to a joint hearing of the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-resurgence-of-Al-Qaeda-in-iraq/.

[40] Jessica D. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* Institute for the Study of War. 2013. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf. p. 18.

[41] Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* p. 9.

[42] Malcolm W. Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq: Inside the Strategy and Tactics of the Iraq Insurgency 2003-2014* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015), pp. 45-46.

[43] Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 118.

[44] Phil Williams, *Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents: Organized Crime in Iraq*, U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, June 2009, accessed June 2, 2017, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB930.pdf.

Evolution of AQI by Phase

Phase one: Founding (March 2003–October 2004)

Jordanian national and career criminal Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's years in Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation had earned him respect in jihadist circles. After returning to Jordan in the 1990s, he established a jihadist cell, which landed him and his followers in prison. After his release, Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan.[45] After the 2001 U.S. invasion of that country he fled to Iran and from there to Iraq. In Iraq, Zarqawi established TwJ, and led a group of non-Iraqis within an encampment of the Kurdish jihadist group Ansar al-Islam. As U.S. leaders publicized their intention to bring down the regime of Saddam Hussein, Zarqawi went about making contacts in Baghdad and elsewhere in Sunni areas of Iraq. In advance of the 2003 U.S. invasion; Zarqawi began operations in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq.[46]

After the U.S. invasion, much of Iraq's quarter-of-a-million-member security and military forces contributed to the anti-U.S. insurgency. They were supplemented by Iraqi jihadists and elements of the fallen Baathist regime who helped facilitate the pipeline of foreign jihadists to support the cause.[47] At the beginning of 2004, however, the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq was considered minimal.[48]

In October 2004, Zarqawi affiliated TwJ with Al-Qaeda, changing the group's name to Qaedat al-Jihad fi Balad al-Rafidayn—Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, more commonly known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI.

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[45] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State.* Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, no. 13 (November 2014), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/en_web_lister.pdf.

[46] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[47] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[48] Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, p. 9, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf

Phase two: Rise and sectarian war (October 2004–October 2006)

In February 2006, AQI bombed the Askari Shrine in Samarra, a holy site housing the remains of two Shiite imams which increased the level of sectarian violence, eventually contributing to a full-scale sectarian civil war.[49]

Zarqawi did adjust AQI tactics to repair its damaged domestic reputation. In January 2006, the AQI leader established the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC)—of which AQI was a dominant part—to minimize the international Al-Qaeda role in Iraq's insurgency.[50] Five local jihadi insurgent groups made up the remainder of the MSC.[51] In April 2006, Abdullah Rashid—better known as Abu Umar al-Baghdadi—was named the leader of the MSC.[52] Baghdadi had been an Iraqi security officer before turning toward a strict practice of Islam in the previous decade.[53]

AQI also shifted from indiscriminant attacks on the Shiite community to targeting only those supporting the central government.[54] In Sunni tribal areas of Iraq, AQI had free rein to enforce strict sharia on the population. The insurgent group also brought tribal smuggling activities under its control.[55] This provided AQI with a domestic income, but it also set the conditions for a local revolt. Mass-casualty suicide

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[49] Ches Thurber, "From Coexistence to Cleansing: The Rise of Sectarian Violence in Baghdad, 2003-2007," *Al-Nakhlah*, Spring 2011.

[50] "Al-Qaeda: The Many Faces of an Islamist Extremist Threat," House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2006, https://fas.org/irp/congress/2006_rpt/hpsci0606.pdf. p. 13.

[51] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper Number 19, March 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf.

[52] Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf

[53] M. J. Kirdar, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq." Center for Strategic and International Studies, Case Study Number 1, June 2011, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedaIraq_Web.pdf

[54] *Al-Qaeda: The Many Faces of an Islamist Extremist Threat.* Report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2006, https://fas.org/irp/congress/2006_rpt/hpsci0606.pdf. p. 13.

[55] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

bombings helped undermine domestic and U.S. confidence that coalition forces could set Iraq on a stable path.[56]

On November 9, 2005, Al-Qaeda in Iraq carried out coordinated bombings in three hotels in Amman, Jordan.[57] While it had the highest profile, this bombing was not AQI's only attack on regional targets. In December 2004, there was a failed AQI suicide attack on the Iraq-Jordan Karama border crossing.[58] In August 2005, AQI operatives fired seven rockets from the Jordanian port city of Aqaba at U.S. ships and Israel's Red Sea coastal city of Eilat.[59] In December 2005, AQI again fired rockets at Israel—this time from Lebanon.[60]

Phase three: Declaration of an Islamic State and decline (October 2006 to 2009)

On October 12, 2006, Zarqawi's successors declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).[61] The group announced a cabinet and governance structure, and claimed authority over areas of western Iraq, which was majority Sunni territory.[62] The claimed authority of ISI covered the provinces of Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Ninewa, and parts of Babil and Wasat Provinces.[63] This was the first time that an AQ affiliate declared territorial control and political rule.[64]

Baghdadi was named "Commander of the Faithful," giving Al-Qaeda's Iraq operations a local face.[65] The new Iraqi face was supported by the group's increasingly Iraqi

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[56] Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf

[57] Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[58] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[59] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[60] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[61] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[62] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[63] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 74.

[64] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[65] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

profile.[66] The group's new spokesman was another Iraqi named Muharib al-Juburi, who was killed the following year.[67] In late 2007, Baghdadi proclaimed that Al-Qaeda in Iraq was "officially dissolved in favor of the Islamic State."[68] The concealment of Al-Qaeda's involvement in the Iraqi jihad was agreed to by AQ core as well. Zawahiri said that "there is nothing in Iraq today called Al-Qaeda. Rather the group Al-Qaeda in Iraq has merged with other jihadi groups into the Islamic State of Iraq...."[69]

In December 2006, Baghdadi specified that ISI consisted almost entirely of Iraqis, claiming that there were only 200 foreign fighters in the group.[70] This declaration may have been intended to downplay ISI's foreign links and mask the group as a purely domestic one. At the time, the foreign makeup of the group was considered to be less than 10 percent.[71] If Baghdadi's figure was accurate, that would suggest a total force structure of over two thousand. Coalition forces also recognized a reduction in the flow of foreign fighters: peaking at 120 per month in 2007 to only 20 a month in 2009.[72]

Not only did ISI continue Zarqawi's sectarian war,[73] but the group also turned on Sunnis—and even other Islamist-oriented militias—that refused to join its coalition.[74] These actions harmed ISI's reputation among Iraq's Sunni population.

By the end of 2006, the Sunni Awakening movement was growing.[75] The local opposition worked parallel to—and was supported by—the "surge" of U.S. forces. ISI found that Anbar Province was no longer serving as a hospitable base for its operations. Much of the group transplanted to the northern city of Mosul.[76] Sectarian

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[66] Myriam Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations." *CTC Sentinel*, June 3, 2010, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/assessing-aqi%E2%80%99s-resilience-after-april%E2%80%99s-leadership-decapitations.

[67] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

[68] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

[69] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

[70] Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq and Al-Qaeda," p. 16.

[71] Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq and Al-Qaeda," p. 16.

[72] Myriam Benraad, "Iraq's Enduring Al-Qaeda Challenge," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 18, 2009, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-enduring-Al-Qaeda-challenge.

[73] Katzman, Kenneth, "Iraq and Al-Qaeda," p. 13. https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf

[74] Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise,* p. 74.

[75] Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, p. 2.

[76] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

violence in Iraq declined after 2007.[77] Pushed out of central Iraq by US forces and the Sunni tribes, many of ISI's remaining operatives escaped to Iraq's north.[78]

ISI's retreat to Mosul allowed it to regroup under favorable conditions. The group was able to exploit tensions among the Sunni Arab, Sunni Kurdish, and Christian populations.[79] It could also attack the latter, continuing its sectarian violence for both propaganda and morale.[80] Mosul also had long served as a logistics hub for foreign AQI/ISI recruits arriving via Syria and Turkey.[81]

The combination of popular resistance and U.S. counterterrorism operations damaged ISI's foreign funding and volunteer pipeline.[82] However, during 2008–2009, ISI managed to reestablish some of its networks in the Sunni tribal areas by exploiting the frustrations of former insurgents who found the central government unresponsive to their needs.[83]

Also in 2008–2009, the group again adapted its operations in the military sphere. As a "state," the group defended its territory. Against U.S. and indigenous forces, this model was unsustainable. Instead, ISI reverted to AQI's earlier model of massive strikes against Iraqi state targets.[84]

Phase four: Resurgent terrorist threat (2009– March 2011)

ISI continued to exploit long-standing Sunni grievances against the Shiite-dominated central government. In addition to recruiting aggrieved Sunnis, ISI benefited from the release of detainees that began in 2009—including some who associated with Al-Qaeda detainees and joined the group's activities upon release.[85] By summer 2010, ISI

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[77] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[78] Katzman, Kenneth, "Iraq and Al-Qaeda," p. 15. https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf

[79] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[80] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[81] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[82] Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq,* p. 2.

[83] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[84] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[85] Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

was estimated to consist of approximately three thousand fighters dispersed in localized cells.[86]

In April 2010, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were killed in Tharthar, Salah al-Din Province.[87] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi became the new leader of ISI.[88] Iraqi national al-Nasir Lidin Allah, known as Abu Suleiman, replaced Muhajir as ISI's minister of war—without also gaining the title of head of AQI.[89] There is evidence to suggest that both Baghdadi and Abu Suleiman were recruited to ISI while detained by U.S. forces at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq.[90] Baghdadi had been in U.S. custody from February to December 2004; he had been in ISI since 2006, serving in roles of religious authority.[91]

The group's focus on terrorist attacks required less manpower and popular support than did its efforts at governance.[92] Information operations to degrade the Iraqi government's legitimacy were key to ISI's objectives. As U.S. forces in Iraq drew down, ISI propaganda shifted to present the Shiite-led government and its security forces as the new occupying power.[93] From summer 2010, ISI began a campaign of targeting Iraqi police and soldiers in Sunni-dominated Iraqi regions.[94]

ISI used its resurgence in Mosul to regain capabilities in building and deploying massive IEDs. By the middle of 2009, the group projected its strength into Baghdad.[95] ISI conducted large-scale terrorist attacks in the Iraqi capital. Throughout 2010, the pace of these operations increased.[96]

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[86] Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

[87] Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

[88] Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

[89] Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations," and Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[90] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[91] Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate.*

[92] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[93] Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

[94] Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

[95] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

[96] Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State.*

Phase five: Resurgence of the state (April 2011–March 2013)

In April 2011, ISI renewed its efforts to portray itself as the defender of Iraq's Sunni Arab population.[97] As US troops continued their withdrawal from Iraq, the country's Sunnis became increasingly frustrated by the central government's sectarian policies.[98] The group used this grievance as an opening to return more significantly to Anbar Province. After the withdrawal, in December 2011, the Iraqi Security Forces were not capable enough to counter ISI without U.S. support.[99]

ISI was able to benefit from the large-scale violence in Syria. ISI recruited among the foreign fighters who had flocked to the conflict.[100] The retrenchment of the Syrian regime also increased freedom of operation for non-state armed groups in eastern Syria. In mid-2011, Baghdadi dispatched ISI leaders to establish al-Nusra Front, as Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. Additionally, some of ISI's organizing moved across the border to use the ungoverned Syrian territory as a safe-haven.[101] On March 4, 2013, Syrian rebels—likely with ISI support—took al-Raqqa, capital of the north-central province of the same name.[102]

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[97] Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, p 2.

[98] Frederick W. Kagan, *Global Al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges.* Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, July 18, 2013, https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/-the-continued-expansion-of-Al-Qaeda-affiliates-and-their-capabilities_134319399831.pdf, p. 4.

[99] Kagan, *Global Al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges*, p. 4.

[100] Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, pp. 5-6.

[101] Byman, "The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq."

[102] Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* p. 18

Phase six: Push into Syria, tension with JN, and end of affiliation (April 2013–February 2014)

By the beginning of 2013, ISI was estimated to have fewer than two thousand fighters.[103] At the same time, however, its operations were expanding dramatically. After the Syrian regime lost control of Raqqa, in March 2013, ISI moved assets into the governorate to secure the city for its own aims.[104]

In April 2013, ISI unilaterally declared that it subsumed Nusra Front back into itself. Now operating on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border, the group rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).[105] Nusra's leadership rejected this merger and instead pledged direct allegiance to Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri.[106]

Despite these tensions, in late 2013 ISIS and Nusra cooperated tactically against the Assad regime.[107] However, in January 2014, Syria's rebel groups directly fought with ISIS, accusing the group of taking advantage of the Syrian conflict to spread its harsh governance tactic.[108] Nusra attempted to mediate between the conflicting sides before joining the secular rebel groups in a failed attempt to dislodge ISIS.[109]

At the same time, ISIS used its territorial base in eastern Syria to takeover territory in western Iraq.[110] On January 1, 2014, the group captured territory in Fallujah and Ramadi, which are major cities in Anbar Province.[111]

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[103] Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, p. 6; McGurk, *Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests*, p. 7.

[104] Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* p. 18

[105] Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* p. 9.

[106] Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* p. 9.

[107] Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* p. 9.

[108] Carla E. Humud et al., *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, R43756, 2014, http://www.cq.com/pdf/crsreports-4562581, p. 11.

[109] Humud et al., *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, p. 11.

[110] Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I.* p. 22.

[111] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "The Arab Spring and Al-Qaeda's Resurgence," House Armed Services Committee, February 4, 2015, 2014, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/DGR_Arab_Spring_testimony_final.pdf, p. 12.

Security Vulnerabilities in Iraq

The independent assessment involved analyzing the security environment in which each affiliate or associate operated. We conducted the environmental analysis on the assumption that the success of an Al-Qaeda affiliate or associate is based not solely on resources, funding and leadership structure, but also on a permissive environment with security vulnerabilities. For AQI, we summarized the security vulnerabilities in Iraq from 2003-2014 in Table 1 below.

The security vulnerabilities included internal conflict, illegitimacy of the central government, demographic instabilities, security sector ineffectiveness, and a neighbor in crisis.

Table 1.   Security vulnerabilities in Iraq (2003-2014)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal Conflict	• The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 unleashed and produced various internal conflicts, notably a Sunni-Shi'i civil war and a multi-faceted insurgency, including a substantial Sunni insurgency. Both developments initially empowered AQI, which sought to co-opt Sunni grievances and to exacerbate the sectarian conflict.
Illegitimacy of Central Government	• Although turnout was high in the 2005 and 2010 elections, Sunni Arab parties mounted serious boycotts in January 2005 (although they participated in December 2005) and in 2010, suggesting that the government and the political process lacked legitimacy in many Sunni Arabs' eyes at crucial moments. Moreover, the mass constituencies available to Sunni and Shi'i insurgencies indicated that in the early years after Saddam's fall, many Iraqis viewed the state as illegitimate. Many Iraqis saw the state either as a U.S. puppet or as a Shi'i sectarian state. These perceptions benefited AQI, especially in the 2004-2006 period.

	• Nouri al-Maliki's re-instatement as Prime Minister in 2010 (despite his party finishing second in that year's elections) and the increasingly sectarian, pro-Shi'i character of his policies after 2011 reinforced many Sunni Iraqis' suspicions of the state and generated mass Sunni anti-government protests. These developments benefited AQI and helped create the political climate for its comeback.
Demographic Instabilities	• There are different estimates of religious demographics in Iraq. One influential estimate from Pew states that Iraq is 51% Shi'i and 42% Sunni.[112] Ethnically, Iraq is approximately 75-80% Arab and 15-20% Kurdish,[113] meaning that approximately half of the Sunnis are Kurds. • As noted above, the insurgency overlapped with a sectarian civil war, and there are enduring sectarian tensions in Iraq. AQI benefited from these trends and also from specifically Sunni grievances, given that the fall of Hussein (an Arab Sunni backed by a network of Arab Sunni elites) weakened the position of Arab Sunnis in Iraqi politics and society.
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	• The U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi military in 2003 fueled the insurgency and created severe challenges when it came to building a new military. Despite years of U.S. investment in training and equipment, the Iraqi forces ultimately proved unable to withstand AQI/ISIS when it began to capture territory in Anbar and elsewhere in 2014. As noted above, the security sector also took on an increasingly sectarian character under al-Maliki. Key units – including the U.S.-trained Counter Terrorism Service – came to be seen as al-Maliki's personal soldiers.[114]
Neighbor in Crisis	• Starting in 2011, Syria's civil war created new opportunities for AQI/ISI to expand its influence, territorial control, and recruitment on both sides of the border. In Syria, AQI/ISI worked to win Sunni support, while in Iraq, AQI/ISI was able to revive its recruitment due to Iraqi Arab Sunni sympathies for Syrian Sunnis.

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[112] Michael Lipka, *The Sunni-Shia divide: Where they live, what they believe and how they view each other,* Pew Research Center Fact Tank, June 18, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/18/the-sunni-shia-divide-where-they-live-what-they-believe-and-how-they-view-each-other/.

[113] "Iraq," *CIA World Factbook* last updated June 21, 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html.

[114] David Witty. *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service,* The Brookings Institute, Center for Middle East Policy, March 16, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-iraqi-counter-terrorism-service/.

U.S. Approach to Counter AQI

The U.S. approach to countering AQI is summarized in Table 2 below. This table describes the U.S. approach to AQI from 2003-2014.

Table 2.   U.S. approaches to AQI (2003-2014)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	• The U.S. took frequent and at times, near-constant unilateral direct action against AQI. The most prominent example of such action was the June 2006 airstrike that killed al-Zarqawi, but raids on the ground were a key feature of the approach: by August 2006, Task Force 714 (the key counterterrorism unit) was conducting some 300 raids a month – a dramatic increase from the 18 raids conducted in August 2004.[115] Task Force 714 used an intelligence-driven, decentralized approach to propel the F3EAD (find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate) cycle.[116]
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	• U.S. and Iraqi forces conducted numerous joint missions against AQI, most prominently the April 2010 raid that killed Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi.
Security Cooperation / Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	• After the disbanding of the Iraq military in 2003, the U.S. invested heavily in rebuilding the armed forces and the police. • The U.S. also trained and equipped various Iraqi counterterrorism units, especially what came to be known as the Counter Terrorism Service.

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[115] Richard Schultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization,* Joint Special Operations University, Report 16-6, 2016, https://www.sofx.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/JSOU16-6_Shultz_TF714_final1.pdf, p. 4.

[116] Schultz, *Military Innovation in War*, p. 3.

Security Sector Reform	• Security sector reform began with the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the program of de-Baathification. From an early point, the top priority for reform became creating a force that could defeat the insurgency,[117] but many of the early security sector reform (SSR) efforts were unsuccessful under the Coalition Provisional Authority. In June 2004, the Coalition created the Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq (MNSTC-I), which worked with the Iraqi Ministries of Defense and the Interior to rebuild the security forces. MNSTC-I was replaced by United States Forces – Iraq, a training program, in 2010.
Civil Military Operations	• The Marines created Civil Military Operations Centers in several key sites in Anbar (Fallujah, Ramadi, Haditha, etc.), the heartland of the Sunni insurgency and a key base for AQI. These Centers had responsibility for matters such as helping civilians obtain identification documents and helping to rebuild Iraqi infrastructure.[118]
Messaging/ counter-messaging	• The U.S. routinely engaged in counter-messaging against AQI. For example, in al-Anbar, Marines were augmented by U.S. Army Special Operations Forces Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) entities who would produce posters, leaflets, billboards, and other media products to denigrate AQI and promote the Iraqi Security Forces. Such programs were replicated elsewhere in Iraq.[119] Additionally, two alleged messaging programs that have been reported in the press are (1) an early effort to plant stories in the Iraqi press denouncing the insurgency;[120] and (2) a series of efforts to discredit AQI and to track viewership of fake AQI films.[121]
Major Combat Operations – Invasion /	• From 2003-2010, the U.S. conducted Operation Iraqi Freedom, which involved a sustained troop deployment to Iraq. One major phase of the operation was the 2007-2008 "surge," which saw the

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[117] Peter Khalil, *Rebuilding and Reforming the Iraqi Security Sector*, The Brookings Institution, Saban Center, Analysis Paper Number 9, July 2006, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/khalil20060713.pdf, p. ix.

[118] Lance Cpl. Paul Torres, "One stop shop: CMOC handles needs for Haditha residents," 1st Marine Division webpage, May 5, 2008, http://www.1stmardiv.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/541633/one-stop-shop-cmoc-handles-needs-for-haditha-residents/.

[119] Author's personal experience, al-Anbar, Iraq, 2007.

[120] Mark Mazzetti and Borzou Daragahi, "U.S. Military Covertly Pays to Run Stories in Iraqi Press," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2005, http://articles.latimes.com/2005/nov/30/world/fg-infowar30.

[121] Crofton Black and Abigail Fielding-Smith, *Fake News and False Flags*, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, October 2, 2016, http://labs.thebureauinvestigates.com/fake-news-and-false-flags/.

Occupation	deployment of over 30,000 additional troops with the aim of fighting the insurgency and restoring security. From 128,300 troops deployed in Iraq in December 2006, levels rose to 166,300 by October 2007, the highest level of the entire war.[122]
	• In 2010, the U.S. transitioned to Operation New Dawn, which focused on stabilization operations and a shift from a primarily military role to a primarily civilian one. The U.S. withdrew almost all troops by December 2011.
Support Host Nation	• The U.S. made numerous efforts to rebuild, support, and strengthen the Iraqi state. The Coalition Provisional Authority (April 2003-June 2004) was an effort to rebuild the state and administer Iraq during the initial transition period. The U.S. also provided technical and security support for elections in 2005 and 2010. Within AQI-affected areas, starting in 2005 the U.S. pursued "clear, hold, and build" campaigns that sought to restore law and order after expelling AQI and other insurgents. This approach was accelerated during the 2007-2008 surge, and gradually declined as the U.S. prepared to withdraw from Iraq in 2010-2011.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQI?

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, lack of post-invasion planning, and decisions that immediately followed, triggered a multi-faceted insurgency and created conditions that allowed Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's network—the group that became AQI in 2004—to thrive. As the insurgency and AQI grew stronger from 2004-2006, the U.S. government had limited, localized, and sometimes fleeting successes in **disrupting** AQI. For example, early U.S. operations in Fallujah, especially Operation Phantom Fury/Operation al-Fajr in November-December 2004, **disrupted** AQI's activities in that city and killed numerous low-level operatives, but did not halt the overall increase in violence, including elsewhere in al-Anbar Province. AQI relocated, and learned that fighting open battles with coalition forces was a poor strategy. A more promising counter-AQI initiative was the "clear, hold, and build" campaign in Tal Afar in 2005, which entailed driving insurgents from the city and then attempting to systematically establish the rule of law. "Clear, hold, and build" later became the guiding principle for many counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq.

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[122] Alan McLean and Archie Tse, "American Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/06/22/world/asia/american-forces-in-afghanistan-and-iraq.html?_r=0.

However, the enduring impact of key U.S. decisions made early in the war—especially disbanding the Iraqi military and pursuing de-Baathification—overshadowed early U.S. efforts to **disrupt** AQI. The very presence of U.S. forces also allowed AQI to draw recruits (both from within Iraq and from a host of other countries) by tapping into Sunni grievances, including outrage toward soldiers perceived as hostile occupiers. The Abu Ghraib scandal, which broke in June 2003, also proved a boon to AQI. Therefore, even amid some tactical successes, the overall security and political situation steadily worsened, enabling the insurgency and boosting recruitment to AQI.

During the initial phase of the insurgency, the U.S. military worked to **dismantle** AQI by removing top commanders, notably Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. His death, however, did not immediately diminish AQI's capabilities. AQI quickly replaced al-Zarqawi and continued to intimidate Sunni populations in Anbar and elsewhere. When AQI outlasted al-Zarqawi's death, U.S. approaches shifted to targeting mid-level leaders in order to dismantle the organization and break the chain of command between leaders and foot soldiers.

AQI remained strong until summer 2007,[123] reflecting the impact of five developments: the Anbar Awakening, which began in late 2006 but took several months to acquire decisive momentum; a greater commitment by the U.S. to protecting and supporting Sunni tribal leaders who opposed AQI; the U.S. troop surge, which began in early 2007; the decline in sectarian violence as Baghdad and other areas became more self-segregated; and the "industrial-strength" counterterrorism operations of Task Force 714.[124] For a time, these developments proved mutually reinforcing and beneficial for overall security and for the counter-AQI effort.

Together, these trends led to the **dismantling** of AQI by 2009-2010. Worth noting in connection with Task Force 714 was that this success was predicated on an unprecedented level of direct action operations that were enabled by a host of critical factors: a very high level of special operations, intelligence, and monetary resources; almost complete freedom of movement and action across the entirety of the country (most of which also featured easily navigable terrain); authorities for action pushed down to essentially the tactical level; a high degree of tolerance for the (at least temporary) detention of suspected members of Al-Qaeda and collateral damage; and a number of significant innovations in technical means of gathering and analyzing intelligence. By 2009-2010, U.S. forces were once again focusing on killing senior AQI leaders: in April 2010, Iraqi security forces, supported by U.S. soldiers, conducted a raid that killed top AQI leaders Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Ayyub al-

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[123] Jonathan J. Schroden, "Measures for Security in a Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32, issue 5 (2009).

[124] Schultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization*, p. 4.

Masri.[125] In June 2010, General Ray Odierno stated that U.S. and Iraqi forces had killed or captured 34 of AQI's top 42 leaders in Iraq, including key officials in charge of finances and recruitment.[126]

AQI/ISI resurged for two major reasons. First, there was Iraqi politics: after the 2010 elections, Iraqi authorities (with U.S. acquiescence) gave Nouri al-Maliki the first chance to form a government, even though his party had finished second in the elections. After beginning his second term as prime minister, al-Maliki intensified the sectarian, pro-Shi'i character of his government and increasingly antagonized Sunnis (again with some U.S. acquiescence). When al-Maliki targeted and purged prominent Sunni politicians and officials, a Sunni-led opposition protest wave emerged in 2012-2013. These protests were not directed or inspired AQI/ISI, but they directly empowered AQI, especially after al-Maliki cracked down on major Sunni politicians.[127] AQI/ISI's initial conquests in Fallujah and Ramadi in early 2014 directly followed Iraqi authorities' moves to destroy Sunni protest camps.

Second, the American withdrawal in 2010-2011 meant that the sectarianized Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) took responsibility for security. Shi'i militias' power grew as well. The ISF were not able to prevent AQI from regaining momentum; despite over $20 billion spent by the U.S. in training and equipping the ISF between 2005 and 2011,[128] the ISF proved corrupt and weak. Under these circumstances, AQI rebuilt its strength through initiatives such as the "Breaking the Walls" campaign of 2012-2013, where it staged over twenty attacks on prisons with the intent of freeing detained members and sympathizers.[129]

For much of 2011-2013, the U.S. did "its best to ignore the country," in one expert's words.[130] However, in December 2013, alarmed about AQI/ISIL's gains in Iraq, the U.S.

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[125] Waleed Ibrahim, "Al-Qaeda's two top Iraq leaders killed in raid," Reuters, April 19, 2010, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence-alqaeda-idUSTRE63I3CL20100419.

[126] Thom Shanker, "Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Neutralized, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/05/world/middleeast/05military.html.

[127] Dexter Filkins, "What We Left Behind," *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind.

[128] Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning from Iraq*, March 2013, https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001083907/http://www.sigir.mil/learningfromiraq/index.html, p. 41; U.S. State Department, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq," March 22, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269040.htm.

[129] Jessica D. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent*, Institute for the Study of War, September 10, 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-iraq-resurgent.

[130] Daniel Byman, "The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq," Testimony before the joint hearing of the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-resurgence-of-Al-Qaeda-in-iraq/.

supplied 75 Hellfire missiles and some surveillance drones to the Iraqi government.[131] In 2014, FMF funding provided weapons, ammunition, and other counterterrorism equipment to Iraqi forces.[132] The U.S. also pursued new training initiatives for Iraqi counterterrorism forces.[133] However, the U.S. reportedly declined Iraqi requests for manned and unmanned airstrikes against AQI/ISIL targets in 2013 and early 2014.[134] The resurgence of AQI/ISIL, as well as broader USG concern about political instability in Iraq, also prompted fresh efforts to engage diplomatically with Iraqi politicians in 2013 and 2014. The U.S. made efforts to work with different segments of the Iraqi political class to address grievances that prompted waves of waves of Sunni protests in 2013.[135] After ISIL captured parts of Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014, U.S. diplomats worked to encouraged the Government of Iraq to "develop and execute a holistic strategy to isolate and defeat ISIL over the long-term."[136] By this time, however, ISIL was breaking with Al-Qaeda, and subsequent developments lie outside the scope of this case study.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQI?

The most dramatic vulnerability to emerge since the start of the affiliate was the civil war in Syria, which created new opportunities for AQI/ISI, as detailed above.

Within Iraq, one major vulnerability that fluctuated over time was the illegitimacy of the state – if the high point of the state's legitimacy came around 2008-2010, then

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[131] Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Sends Arms to Aid Iraq Fight With Extremists," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/26/world/middleeast/us-sends-arms-to-aid-iraq-fight-with-extremists.html; and House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing: Iraq," February 5, 2014, http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140205/101716/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20140205.pdf, p. 9.

[132] "Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq," U.S. State Department, March 22, 2017. https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269040.htm.

[133] House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk," p. 10.

[134] Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Said to Rebuff Iraqi Request to Strike Militants," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/world/middleeast/iraq-asked-us-for-airstrikes-on-militants-officials-say.html.

[135] House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk," pp. 3-4.

[136] House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk," p. 7.

the overt sectarianism of al-Maliki's government during the 2010-2014 period represented a renewed vulnerability and a key enabling factor for AQI/ISI. After the surge, the U.S. moved to a "by, with, and through" approach – but the chosen partner, al-Maliki, increasingly had divergent interests from those of the United States. When the U.S. withdrew its forces and largely stopped paying attention to the country, Washington ceded nearly all of its leverage over him and therefore his interests took over.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

The main shifts in the U.S. approach came in 2006-2007, when the U.S. supported the Anbar Awakening and conducted the surge; in 2011, when the U.S. completed its troop withdrawal and, to an extent, disengaged politically; and late 2013, when the U.S. began to re-engage amid AQI/ISIL's resurgence.

Conclusion

In this case study, we examined AQI's leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. We also examined how the group has evolved over time. We outlined the vulnerabilities in Iraq's security environment that AQI has exploited, and the relative effectiveness of the U.S. government's approaches to counter AQI over time. For the full context in which this case study was used, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.[137]

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[137] McQuaid, et. al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

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